

Name: _____ Class: _____

Emmett Till

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Emmett Louis Till (1941-1955) was a fourteen-year-old African American boy from Chicago who was lynched in Mississippi after reportedly flirting with a white woman, Carolyn Bryant. "Lynching" refers to killing someone for an alleged offense with or without a legal trial, and the act is often linked to angry mobs and race. The injustice of his murder inspired many in the Civil Rights Movement. In a book published in 2017, Bryant said she made up her original accusations, sparking further discussion around Till's death and legacy. As you read, note the racial climate of the South in which Emmett Till was killed. As you read, note the racial climate of the South in which Emmett Till was killed.

- [1] Emmett Till grew up in a middle-class, predominantly black neighborhood in Chicago, raised by his mother, Mamie Till. In 1955 he was 14, but because of his stocky, muscular build, everyone who knew him said he looked like an adult. That summer, his great uncle Mose Wright travelled up from Mississippi to Chicago to visit Emmett and his mother. When Wright returned to the south, Emmett begged his mother to let him tag along, to visit the rest of the family. She relented,¹ but sent him with a warning: Mississippi is very different from Chicago – make sure to behave yourself around the white people down there. Emmett agreed he would.



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Flirting with Danger

He arrived in his uncle's hometown, Money, Mississippi, in late August. One morning Emmett and a cousin stopped into a local store, where they encountered a young white woman named Carolyn Bryant. She and her husband, Roy Bryant, owned the store. Earlier in the week Emmett had bragged to his cousins about the white girls he'd dated at school in Chicago, so they dared him to say something to Carolyn as she sat behind the counter.

Accounts have always varied as to what Emmett said to her or what he did. For a long time, it was believed that he may have whistled, touched her hand, or asked her on a date. However, in an interview from 2007, Carolyn Bryant said "nothing that boy did could ever justify what happened to him," and she confessed that she made up her claims that he had made an advance on her.² Carolyn said that she did not remember what else happened that night, but it is known that she responded to Emmett Till by running outside to retrieve a pistol from her car. When the boys saw the gun, they ran away from the store to avoid more trouble.

1. **Relent (verb):** to agree to do or accept something after resisting or refusing
2. Carolyn Bryant made this confession to author Timothy Tyson during a 2007 interview, and it was published in his book, *The Blood of Emmett Till*, in 2017.

The Murder

Roy Bryant heard about the incident a few days later and began questioning black men around town to find out who had done it. He eventually traced it back to Emmett. Bryant and a friend, J. W. Milam, broke into Mose Wright's house in the early morning hours of August 28, 1955, and demanded to know who had "harassed" his wife. Emmett confessed. They threatened to shoot him, told him to get dressed, and led him outside to their pickup truck.

- [5] Bryant and Milam drove out of town, stopping twice to beat Emmett severely. According to a later interview, their original intent was to beat him up and leave him on a riverbank, just to teach him a lesson. But as they continued to beat him, Emmett called them names and insisted he was just as good as they were. Presumably out of anger, they drove to the edge of the Tallahatchie River, shot Emmett in the head, tied a weight around his neck with barbed wire, and threw his body into the water.

Later that morning, Emmett's Uncle Mose called the authorities and reported Bryant and Milam for kidnapping. They were arrested shortly thereafter, and Emmett was presumed still missing.

The Funeral

Three days after the abduction,³ a fisherman discovered Emmett's body in the water of the Tallahatchie. The corpse was so disfigured⁴ from the beatings and from being in the water so long that the only way it could be identified was by a ring on Emmett's finger, bearing his initials.

When Mamie Till found out about the murder, she insisted that the body be sent back to Chicago immediately, whatever the cost. When she saw Emmett's mutilated⁵ face and body, she also insisted they hold an open-casket funeral, so everyone could see the worst effects of racism in the U.S.

Tens of thousands of people came to see Emmett and show their support for his mother. Newspapers across the country carried the story.

The Trial

- [10] Bryant and Milam stood trial for Emmett's murder in late September, 1955. Lawyers for the defense argued that the body was too disfigured to be properly identified, and they claimed Emmett was probably still alive and simply had not turned up yet. Mose Wright testified against his nephew's murderers, the first black man to testify against white men in the state of Mississippi.

The jury was all white men. After listening to the facts of the case for five days, they deliberated⁶ for 67 minutes before concluding that Bryant and Milam were not guilty. One juror said in an interview, "If we hadn't stopped to drink pop,⁷ it wouldn't have taken that long."

3. the act of kidnapping someone

4. damaged in appearance

5. cut or injured severely, with lasting damage

6. **Deliberate (verb):** to think about or discuss issues and decisions carefully

7. soda

Just one year later, in 1956, *Look* magazine interviewed Bryant and Milam, and they gave their account of the murder for the very first time (they did not speak during their trial). They admitted to everything, including the shooting, and filled in many details from the story. Milam explained why he felt he had to kill Emmet: “‘Chicago boy,’ I said, ‘I’m tired of ‘em sending your kind down here to stir up trouble. I’m going to make an example of you – just so everybody can know how me and my folks stand.’”

Throughout the interview, the two men never showed any sign of guilt or wrongdoing; in their minds they had done what was right to protect their families and their country – they were heroes. Mamie Till later confirmed that “they never regretted what they had done.... He said he would do the same thing over again, to whoever got in his way. I felt sorry for him.”

A Symbol for Civil Rights

Reactions to the feature in *Look* shed light on the complex race issues facing the country in the 1950s. Letters to the editor flooded in, some congratulating the interviewer’s bravery. One preacher from Ohio wrote, “You are to be complimented for your willingness to stick your neck out in this manner for the sake of justice.”

- [15] But others condemned the piece: “By this example of opinionated, baseless reporting, *Look* itself pays scant recognition to the traditions of American Justice it claims were ignored,” said one Mississippi reporter. Another writer defended Bryant and Milam, saying, “[They] did what had to be done, and their courage... is to be commended.⁸ To have followed any other course would have been unrealistic [and] cowardly.” Reactions like these across the South prompted people to understand the need for greater equality between blacks and whites.

Emmett Till’s murder became one of the most important catalysts⁹ of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. When Rosa Parks famously refused to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, in December of 1955, she said later she had been thinking of Emmett and the injustice he experienced. Her action sparked the year-long Montgomery Bus Boycott, which brought the Civil Rights movement to the national stage.

Two years later, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1957, which set up protections for black voters and established the Civil Rights Division in the Justice Department; federal officials could now get directly involved in cases where civil rights were being abridged. Later, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 ended all forms of segregation¹⁰ in public places and banned employment discrimination.

Mamie Till, who passed away in 2003, understood the significance of Emmett’s death. She herself became actively involved in empowering black youth in Chicago. But the pain of her son’s murder never left her completely. “This is what really started the civil rights movement, that’s what everyone tells me. But I was not trying to start anything. I was just upset that my only child was gone, and so needlessly.”

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8. **Commend (verb):** to praise
 9. **Catalyst (noun):** something that initiates or speeds up a change or action
 10. referring to the separation different races, classes, or ethnic groups, namely the separation of white people and black people in the U.S.

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which TWO statements best describe the central ideas of the article?
 - A. Emmett Till was an innocent boy who was hurt because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time.
 - B. Emmett Till's murder prompted Mississippi to move its justice system to be fairer towards all.
 - C. The national attention received by Emmett Till's murder embarrassed many Southerners into fighting for racial equality.
 - D. Emmett Till was an ordinary boy who became the victim of some Southerners' hate and fear.
 - E. Emmett Till's death turned him into a symbol of America's racial injustice, inspiring many to promote equality for all.
 - F. Emmett Till's death revealed that all Southerners thought he deserved to die for daring to flirt with a white woman.

2. PART B: Which TWO of the following phrases from the text best support the answer to Part A?
 - A. "Earlier in the week Emmett had bragged to his cousins about the white girls he'd dated at school in Chicago, so they dared him to say something to Carolyn as she sat behind the counter." (Paragraph 2)
 - B. "'Chicago boy,' I said, 'I'm tired of 'em sending your kind down here to stir up trouble. I'm going to make an example of you – just so everybody can know how me and my folks stand.'" (Paragraph 12)
 - C. "Mamie Till later confirmed that 'they never regretted what they had done.... He said he would do the same thing over again, to whoever got in his way. I felt sorry for him.'" (Paragraph 13)
 - D. "Emmett Till's murder became one of the most important catalysts of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s." (Paragraph 16)
 - E. "Later, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 ended all forms of segregation in public places and banned employment discrimination." (Paragraph 17)
 - F. "'But I was not trying to start anything. I was just upset that my only child was gone, and so needlessly.'" (Paragraph 18)

3. Which statement best describes how Mamie Till was affected by her son's death?
 - A. Mamie Till was embarrassed her son was murdered and withdrew from public view.
 - B. Mamie Till felt that she needed to share what happened to her son to show how bad racism was in the South.
 - C. Mamie Till was inspired to fight for the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1957.
 - D. Mamie Till was celebrated after she forgave the killers of her son during an interview with Look Magazine.

4. How does the following sentence from paragraph 13 contribute to the author's portrayal of Southern beliefs about race at the time of the murder: "Throughout the interview, the two men never showed any sign of guilt or wrongdoing; in their minds they had done what was right to protect their families and their country – they were heroes."
- A. A belief existed in some segregated Southern communities that black men who asserted their equality were dangerous to individuals and the social order.
 - B. In the South, everyone believed that all African Americans were dangerous to the community and deserved to be monitored and put in their place.
 - C. Southern white men were threatened by their wives' attraction to African American men and retaliated with aggressive behavior towards black men.
 - D. Defending the home and family is a Southern tradition that prevents people from feeling remorse for hurting others.

5. How does background on Emmett Till's life help us understand the impact of his murder?

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. Emmett Till's murder was one of many causes for social unrest and the Civil Rights Movement. Can you think of similar catalysts for social movements then or now? What do these events have in common?
2. Why do you think that the jury did not convict Emmett's murderers? Do you believe the same trial would have the same outcome today? Why or why not?
3. In the context of this article, what are the effects of prejudice? Cite evidence from the article, your personal experience, and other literature, art, and history in your answer.
4. Do you believe that Carolyn Bryant was afraid of Emmett Till? What do you think motivated her and her husband to act the way that they did? How did fear drive their actions, and what could they be said to be so afraid of?